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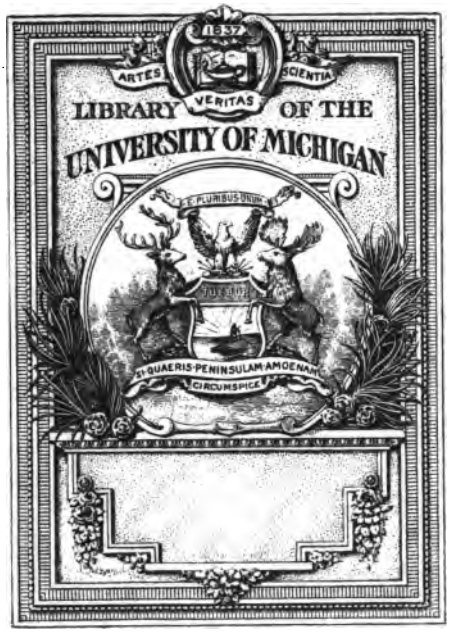
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THE MARSH

THE MARSH

A Poem by

BAYARD BOYESEN

BOSTON
RICHARD G. BADGER
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THE MARSH

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PERSONS

Luxander.
His Father.
His Mother.
Nyassa.
Father Lamion, a priest.

THE MARSH

Act I

Scene.— *A Hall in the Castle of Nyarva. There is an old-world air of sadness in the room; for though the dull green upholstery of the high-backed oaken chairs, the pale tapestries, the heavy curtains, colored like dead foliage and drawn in flowing lines from the long leaded windows, harmonize; the harmony is superficial, is in things only, and the spirit of the place seems not graciously to dwell here, but to be closed in.*

It is night, and the tall candles, set in brackets wrought of brass, cast their light among heavy shadows, suggesting dimly a touch of the churchly life amid the sad riches of the castle hall.

The Mother, *a tall gaunt woman, robed in lace and stiff crimson cloth, is pacing the room. When she raises her head, the light of the candles looks yellow upon the taut skin drawn over the violent features of a face that is grand in its commanding strength; when she presses the sharp chin upon the backs of her interlocked fingers, the shadows soften the face so that one wonders whether it is sorrow or power that has so indelibly marked this face.*

The Mother. Luxander, O Luxander, what of
him?
O son, where art thou and where hast thou been?
Two days are gone, two days and nights, and still
Sorrow, huge workman, wielder of world-anvils,
Strikes off the hours from the block of time.

(*The windows at the back are slowly opened from without: a marble stairway is dimly seen and a balcony upon which the* Father *is standing. He is a very old man; his long white beard flows down over a loose dark blue garment. There is a strange look of youth on his wrinkled face.*

(The Mother *runs to him and leads him into the room and closes the windows.*

The Mother. Luxander, what of him?

The Father. Be seated. Listen.
I followed till I found him where the great
Cathedral walls shut off the marsh. His face
Was pale (O pitifully pale!) and on
His lips a strange unrestful shadow played,
Like a white wind upon an instrument
Touching to song. He smiled: I felt as though
A silver ripple had passed over me.

The Mother. You spoke to him?

The Father. 'Twas he who spoke: *I hear*
The strange uneasy surging of the sea
Where far beyond the marshes huge waves lunge
Upon a sun-fed sand. And then he smiled
On me again as who should say, *O Father,*
Dost thou hear nothing?

The Mother. And you heard the—

The Father Only
The low susurras of an amorous wind
Whose pale lips kissed the green of summer leaves
To hectic red.

The Mother. What does he now?

The Father. I know not.
I sought to cry, *Come to me,* and my voice
Fell like a bird shot through with his swift glance.

I tried to take him by the wrist, and hard
Cold fingers as of fear held back my hands.
Then, smiling, suddenly, he moved away.
'Tis only from the steeples of the church,
He said, *that we behold the marshy plains*
And in the thick sweet marshland odors find
The salt tang of the distant sea. And more
He said—I know not what—but in my soul
I felt as though some wild thing cried for life.

The Mother. Oh, you were ever weak! When you were but
A child, I think an avalanche of years
Fell on your shoulders, crushed and smothered manhood
Ere it had time to sprout. I love my son,
And joy that he can find some happiness
In this wan twilight country of our home;
But I would rather strike him dead before
Mine eyes than see the marshland fever wet
With scum of her hot yellow-dripping tongue
And swollen lips the sweet flesh of my boy!

The Father. Would God it were the fever of the marsh!

The Mother. Be plain.

The Father. It is the fever of the soul
When the sharp teeth of strange desire are fixed
In the throat of youth.

The Mother. Nyassa, where is she?

The Father. The sad Nyassa sits alone and mourns,
Weeping for wane of love.

The Mother. O men
Who in the white communion kneel, and drink
The wine of girlhood from a heart, and leave

From your false lips the silver chalice empty
And bitter evermore, had you met death
Guarding the threshold of your mother's womb,
It had been well for you! Where is she now?

The Father. She sits where on the melancholy river
The thin mists writhe.

The Mother. Luxander must
Be found. There is yet hope. For he would once
Pour out the wonder of his youth before her,
Lie at her feet for days, desiring only
To dream the lolling moments by with her.
He must be found: Nyassa still can make
An inroad to his heart and quench, perhaps,
The smoky fires of his soul.

The Father. Alas!
I too placed hope in her. But I have come
To know, there are some souls, white companies
That wander ever in the world communing,
Though oceans and the awful void of space
Unroll between them; but not jewelled words
Nor the contact of sweet bodies nor the look
Of loving eyes, nor scarlet bands of passion,
Unite when souls are twain.

The Mother O husband, husband,
Art thou, too, going from me—toward the marsh!

(The Father *starts as though his deepest thought had surprised him upon another's lips. There is a tense moment of silence. Then he seems to sink into himself, and does not even look up as* Nyassa, *a pale girl, beautiful as a vague faint flower on a waving stem, enters.*

Nyassa. The Father Lamion bade me say the Church
Holds him again within her shrine.
The Mother. O God,
My God, thy mercy as a shower of stars
In the blue night hath streamed into my soul.
Lo! from the pit wherein thou cast me, Lord,
Ladders of moonbeams lead aloft. Nyassa,
This is a message from our God. O husband,
Unwind the golden languors of thy dream.
Awake, I say! The Father Lamion
Is come.
The Father. What say you?
The Mother. Father Lamion!
The voice of him who fed Luxander's youth,
The sanctuary where he brought his small
Boy griefs for comfort, is at hand. O Father, God,
Close the wide eyes of night that stare upon
My boy and lead him back to where thy light
Burns ever steadfast in the church!
Nyassa. He said
That on the morrow when the meagre dawn
Looks through the latticed windows of the trees
Upon the hills, he would beside the altar
Await Luxander and yourselves.
The Mother. Nyassa,
Luxander must be found ere dawn, and you
With recollections of your love must lure
Him to the church.
Nyassa. Alas, alas, dear lady,
I can no longer lure. But I shall pray,
And if the white Lord Jesus Christ who died

For us, poor lovers in a loveless world,
Will hear me, I will bring him to the church.

The Mother. Nay, be not proud, my girl, but cling on him
With kisses and the winding arms of love;
And speak of old forgotten joyous times
When love was as a pretty boy with whom
You ran a-dancing and a-singing over
The hills; and hope a falcon that would kill
Whatever hawk flew 'twixt you and the sun.

Nyassa. It is not pride, dear lady: we who love
Have no place in our hearts for austere pride.
And for the past, the heavy snows are fallen:
Let us not dig beneath lest we should see
The piteous body, frozen, stark and dead.

The Mother. Husband, will you sit by and see this child
Confront my will! Are we so ignorant
Of love that we must bow to her pale talk?

The Father. I know not. Sure, I think love is an eagle
That dwelleth only in the eyries of the light,
And you and I, dear wife, sweet wife of mine,
In the dark valley of our age, no longer
Behold his flying. Yet sometimes I think
I hear, immeasurably far above me,
The mighty flapping of his wings.

(Nyassa *runs to the* Father, *kneels before him, and clasping his hands, presses them to her brow.*

Nyassa. O Father,
Let me be close to you! I feel your soul
Is weeping for me, and the tears I hear
Like golden waters, dripping, dripping, dripping,

Like golden waters in a golden cave.

(*Suddenly her body shivers, convulses; and she slips to the floor swooning.*

The Father. This is thy deed, Luxander, thine alone!

(*During the last words, the windows at the back have been hastily thrown open and* Luxander *is seen upon the balcony, his pale, ecstatic face thrown upward, his white garment distinct against the blue night. After a moment he steps quickly into the room, and looks with plaintive, smiling bewilderment at the figure of the prostrate girl, at* The Mother *stooping over her, at* The Father *standing apart in awkward and helpless sorrow.*

Luxander (*to himself*). How beautiful she lies there and how calm!
A lily of the virgin moonlight born,
So cool, so lovely and serene. And oh,
How white the light upon her brow! So must
The moon, I think, shine on the waves; so might
A lily look within the sea; and oh!
To be a merman there and contemplate,
Down in the cool green twilights, that frail lily!
Oh! oh! alas! Blind marsh and restless surge,
Where do ye call me ?

Nyassa (*stirring slightly*). Oh, Luxander, Luxander!
Oh, golden waters in a golden cave!

(The Mother *and* The Father *suddenly look up, and then silently and with constrained movements go out through the door at the right.* Luxander *looks after them, smiles, and runs lightly to* Nyassa, *blows upon and kisses her eyelids.*

Luxander. Awake not, my beloved, O awake
No more! May white sleep wind her abluent arms,
Encircling thee forever, and the god
Of dream place on thy brows his golden band!
O frail and fair! thou art as some sweet lute,
Which life's thick fingers strumming on, shall snap
In twain. O that thy sleep were everlasting,
Or that the phantoms of strange thought had not
Wrapped round my mind their mist-cold hair! O pleasant
It were to dream forever by thy side
In some small cottage in a valley, lovely
With sprinklings of a million waterfalls
And many flowers, jasmine, asphodel
And rose. And pleasant there to lie before thee
Who art more smooth and lovely than a valley,
Than waterfall or moonlight flower, rose
Or jasmine, asphodel; and sit in talk,
And wonder why God fashioned violets
And white-winged daisies of the golden hearts
So fair, and gave his strength to weeds; or watch
Some shepherd boy who leaves his flock to stray
Upon the rounded verdure of the hills,
Nibbling the fresh wet grass, while he, sweet lad,
Weaves pretty garlands dreamily; or see—

(*Suddenly he stops speaking, and as he raises his head as though to listen, an expression of bewildering terror comes upon his face. He rushes to the open windows, and holding out his arms cries*

O marsh, blind marsh and restless surge
Where do ye call me?

O soul, blind soul and restless heart,
Where do ye follow?

Nyassa. His lips were on mine eyelids, and my name
Fell from his lips as softly on my brow
As rose's petals in a silver bowl.
Or was I dreaming? Surely, it was he.
O lost Luxander, how I love thee still!

(Luxander *starts and as he comes to* Nyassa, *his eyes gleam, his face becomes deathly pale and grim with purpose.*

Luxander. I love.

Nyassa. Luxander—you?

Luxander. I.

Nyassa. Whom?

Luxander. Why, death!
Some call it poesy or life or joy
Or love. All follow in the eager dance
Of death.

Nyassa. The fever of the marsh!

Luxander. Fools say
To me: *Beware the marsh;* but on the hills
Death is a roe that skips me by and drinks
The clear brooks only; on the marsh he tarries,
Huge reptile with his smooth black flesh, and sucks
The stagnant waters of my life. Hark, Hark!
The voices call! Yet I who seek the light
And all the rich possessions of the sea,
Hide like a coward captain in my tent
And send my thoughts with full emblazonment
Into the war! O that this cabined mind
Could split the fleshly ship in twain and leap

Into the everlasting ocean! (*He falls into a chair*).

Nyassa. What
Troubles thee?

Luxander. I am weary and I fain
Would sleep. And yet—and yet methinks I sleep
Somewhat too much.

Nyassa. Why, now you never sleep,
But all night long beneath the orange moon
You wander lonely by the marsh.

Luxander. How know
You that?

Nyassa. But yesternight your mother said—

Luxander. Ay, mother, mother, mother mine! Like death
You are with your hard fingers and moist palms
And clinging strength! Would God I'd never had
A mother; never known in dream or hope
The windy meadows of the sea, or that
Before life fixed his shrewd teeth in my throat,
I had passed onward where the winter stars
And moon were silvering the sea with music,
And on the ripples of their glacial notes
Sailed upward, upward, upward in a dream
Of sound.

Nyassa. O, you are pale as some lost soul
Wandering at midnight in the place of love!

Luxander. Fair was I once.

Nyassa. O wonderfully fair!

Luxander. For you would look upon me like the dawn
Smiling on marble, and I would feel my face

And neck warm to a mottled pink and white
Beneath the abluent washing of thine eyes.
Then all my soul came singing to my lips.

Nyassa. And ah, how you would ride across the sky
To greet that dawning, buoyant as a god
Whose leaping coursers cleave the startled night
Like whirlwinds of swift flame!

Luxander. Alas, Nyassa,
Those twilight mellow evenings and white nights
Were long ago, a very great while since,
And you have been content to be a sheep
Upon the hills and valleys of Nyarva,
Obeying a dead Pastor when he said:
Be thou fulfilled in me: turn not thine eyes
To where the naked legions of the dawn,
The flying white-limbed legions as they sing,
Shoot from a pearl and ivory armory
The bronze-tipped arrows of the light. But I—
I struggle pale and lonely while my soul
Burns with the scarlet splendors of new life.

Nyassa. Your words whirr round my forehead like blind bats
Flapping against the windows of my mind.
And yet— I look upon thee— Oh, thy brows
Are as washed silver and thine eyes as water
Shot with the sunlight. Everywhere I see
Light, light, and light.

Luxander. What more? Speak on.

Nyassa. O my Luxander, let me follow thee!
Wherever life shall lead you I would go.

(Luxander *takes a step toward her, his face irradiate with a gleam of happiness; then stops and cries out in fear and doubt.*

Luxander. Swear, swear!
Nyassa. By our Lord Jesus Christ I swear.
Luxander. Though love immaze thee in a sunless chasm.
Nyassa. I swear.
Luxander. Though I should lead thee to the marsh.
Nyassa. The marsh!
Luxander. Swear.
Nyassa. I swear.
Luxander (*going to the windows*). At dawn to-morrow
Within the church.
Nyassa. But stay.
Luxander. To-morrow.
Nyassa. Stay!

(Luxander *runs out through the open windows and down the steps.* Nyassa *after a moment's hesitation, rushes out, and standing on the balcony, looks into the darkness.*

Nyassa. Luxander, O Luxander, turn thee back!
He hears not. Turn thee back! He will not hear.
Luxander! Ah, his hand is on the gate.
He's gone.

(*Enter through the doorway on the left* The Mother *and* The Father.

The Mother. Nyassa! Gazing at the night!
Nyassa!
The Father. Now she dreams of him.
The Mother. Nyassa!
Nyassa. Who calls?
The Mother. 'Tis I. What ails thee, girl?
Nyassa. Why, nothing.

The Mother. Then hence; get to thy room.
The Father. Where went Luxander?
The Mother. Turn not her thoughts to him. Three hour's time
And she must meet the Father Lamion.
Go now, Nyassa. If thou canst, climb up
The cloudy stairways of the sky to thought
Of heaven. Then meet us in the church at dawn.
The Father. Nyassa, I would know where went my son.
Nyassa. I know not, but at dawn he too will meet
The Father Lamion and us.
The Father. 'Tis well.
Good-night. (*He goes out to the left*).
The Mother. Good-night, Nyassa. Think no more
Of him. Luxander shall obey my will.
If not—Christ guard and keep thee till the dawn.
(*She goes out to the left*).
(Nyassa *stands for a moment, an expression of piteous bewilderment on her face; then with a short gesture of abandonment goes slowly out upon the balcony and down the steps*).

Act II

Scene.—*The altar of a cathedral. In the back a large rose-window richly stained; beneath it, a little to the left, an altar decked in white and azure and gold, and to the right, a ponderous door of carven oak. On the altar, raised upon a pedestal of ribbed marble, a golden cross, on either side of which two tall candles flicker, casting a fitful light upon the cross, and below, upon the broad steps patterned in metal and stone.*

Yet, for all the infinite detail of the workmanship and rich ornamentation, for all the heavy shadows floating as if they had dwelt forever around the dark columns, beneath the large arches, there is a feeling of expansiveness in the cathedral, a suggestion of light.

(*On the steps, to the right,* Luxander *lies sleeping. Enter* Nyassa, *glancing about her fearfully until her eyes rest upon* Luxander.

Nyassa. Luxander! Lo, he sleeps. Alas, I fear
The wonder of white sleep; for in the sleep
Of youth before time's finger rudely carves
Upon its brows, the mask falls and the soul
Lies on the vacant face. I hear an echo.
Often I hear faint echoes and I think
That all the vagrant noises of the world,
The morning carol of the birds, the sound
Of night that flys with stately wings outspread,
The wind from whose blind eyes the colorless
Cold tears fall on the toiling earth, are but
The echoes of lost souls who tarried here
Awhile and are passed on. Strange echoes! Once
I sat beside the willow pond at evening,

Peeling the willow wands that I might see
Their liquid whiteness like Luxander's arms;
And lo, I sang my soul out in the night:
The murmuring forests gave me back his name!
But now that he is by, I fear to look
Upon him and I hear no name: my words
Fly through the falling shadows like blue birds
And startle silence from white-lidded sleep,
But wake not him.
I think I could make songs
Upon his sleeping were I not so sad.
Yet I have heard a minstrel say that music
Can ease the heart of pain and woe, and free
The laggard waters of the soul to stream
In liquid song. It might awake him gently.
(*A long pause. Then she sings in a low mellow voice*).

The tears run deep
Where he lies asleep—
White sleep in the arms of dream.
Why should he weep?
Does the soul's bewildered stream
Drain out on the face of sleep
The sedges of bitter dream?

Who sings in sooth
To the sleeping youth—
White youth with the lips of love
And rose-sweet breath?
Oh, what is he weeping of?
Death, death, it is sallow death
That sings in the heart of love!

He wakes. Oh, oh, I am afraid, afraid,
Afraid!

(Nyassa *runs behind a pillar; for* Luxander *has stirred restlessly, and now sits up, and looks around him*).

Luxander. I heard sweet music. Ah, the dream!
Music there was, for myriad notes were on
The air, like moonlight mists of waterfalls
That drift and sink in vapor ere the earth
Tremble to drink them. Eagerly I ran
With parted lips and flying hair to follow
The music. I touched it, and the notes
Were as a million naked souls who danced
Upon the slanted moonbeams hand in hand.
They clasped my hand, and on a wave of sound
With labent motion floating, lo, we rose
Until we aureoled the head of God.
There from the snow-capped mountain of his brows
We watched the night unfold, and saw the dawn
Unwind the rosy vapors from her limbs,
And leaning from a cloudy balcony,
Loosen her golden tresses to the world.
Then all the kindly race of men uprose
Singing for festival, and joyously
Went forth like music visible in dance.
And all men labored and the earth rejoiced.
Then suddenly God shuddered, for the wind
Was torn with shrieks of laughter and we saw
A huge mirk monster wading through the air;
And with the flapping of his tail he crunched,
And with his human arms, the golden towers,
The marble halls of alabaster soldered,
And all man's ivory armament of joy.
From his loose gums there wriggled whitish spume,

And from his body steam exuded thick
As yellow mist from out a fevered land.
He snorted and he tore his clotted mane,
And shook until the earth was black with vermin.
His laughter clattered on the rocks like sheets
Of metal. Suddenly through steaming clouds
Of offal, he sank down upon a bank
Of slime and slid into the void of space.
God wept, and God had mercy, and he hurled
A thousand æons to the pit of time.
God wept, and God had mercy, and he made
The sea's green meadows for the dawn to play
Upon and lighten with her frolic eyes.
But sudden as I watched the human world,
The lacerant black fingers of the wind
Clutched me and clawed and tossed aloft, and lo,
I fell beyond the reaches of the sea,
Beyond the marsh, upon a twilight land.
But I have seen the ocean and God's dream,
And I shall toil on through the marshland slime
Where light is and the sea.
Oh, yet 'tis bitter
To fare alone. Nyassa, will she come,
I wonder, where the blue waves roll in light?

(Luxander *bows his head in his hands.* Nyassa *comes from behind the pillar and places her arms round his neck.*

Nyassa. Arise, Luxander. Let us go.

Luxander. Nyassa!
How like a lily found amid the rocks
Art thou!

Nyassa. Arise, my love, arise.

Luxander. You fear me not?
Nyassa. Nay, as I labored through the night to thee,
My love flew on before me heralding
A dawn.
Luxander. Yet we must wait.
Nyassa. Your parents?
Luxander. Ay,
For them. Methinks this hour is as a ship
Becalmed within the centre of the storm:
The sails hang loosely flapping, and the rowers
Relax their limber muscles on the oars;
And though I cry aloud, they will not row,
And through the storm whirl near, it will not strike.
Nyassa. You must remain?
Luxander. My parents sentinel
The forward way, and they are drugged with hope.
I shall remain until they wake.
Nyassa. And then?
Luxander. Through yonder door imbedded in that wall
Of rock, for centuries unmoved, I shall
Pass onward to the sea.
Nyassa. And you will love me?
Luxander. Love plays upon the golden shore, sweet child,
And winds his pretty fingers in his hair.
Nyassa. And will he be our playmate on the sands
And sing us songs?
Luxander. Ay, all day long he sings,
For he is prodigal of time, and throws
His ravelled balls aloft for them to catch

Who can.

Nyassa. Ah, we will catch them, will we not?
Unravel them and find the gems within?

(*A long pause: they sit quiet, gazing with vague eyes into space. Then* Nyassa *very timidly places her hand on* Luxander's *hand.*

Nyassa. Would he not play within the valley here?

Luxander. Love droops in darkness and grows old.

Nyassa. And yet
I knew him in these valleys and low hills;
Oft have I seen him, with his company
Of ivory lads and mild-eyed maidens, lying
Upon a wave of spring which lightly swept
Across the apple and the chestnut trees;
And the long branches stretched aloft to pluck
The foam-flowers, and were white because he passed.
And I have seen him when the god of dream
Sank through the fluid night upon the earth,
And they two wandered hand in hand, and kissed
The lillied eyelids of lone virgins weeping
They knew not why. And oft—
(*The bell in the steeple tolls five*).

Luxander (*rising*) My hour is up!

(*As he goes toward the door, enter* The Father, The Mother, *and* Father Lamion, *who is a very old man, but still virile in body and soul.*

The Father. Luxander.

Luxander. Well?

The Mother. The Father Lamion
Is come to greet and heal you, son.

Luxander. Good Father,
'Tis many months since I have seen you.

Father Lamion. Many,
My son. The golden moments of our lives
Trickle between our fingers ere we know.
But you are troubled. Would you speak with me
Alone?
Luxander. Nay, Father, not alone. The words
That I must speak stick in my throat like burrs
And will not out.
Father Lamion. Luxander, let us pray.
Here in God's sanctuary it is meet
To pray, and prayer leads down the marble steps
Into the wide lagoons of peace. So let
Us pray, and having prayed you will find heart
For speech.
Luxander. O Father, the lagoons are not
For me, who drown upon the open ocean
And follow with my hungry eyes, the while
I struggle in the swirling wake, a vessel
Upon whose purple sails and crossbars gleam
The golden dusts of meteors clashing hard.
Father Lamion. Speak plain.
Luxander. The marble steps I shall not tread
Whose feet shall labor in the marsh.
Father Lamion. The marsh!
Luxander. The black sweat of the toiling world shall cover
My feet and limbs, and I shall reach the sea.
The Mother. Oh, oh, alas! the marsh, the marsh!
Luxander!
O husband, speak to him, command!
The Father. Thy will,
O God, be done.
The Mother. Nyassa, speak, implore!

O silence of a brittle-hearted maid!
What, cracked because he smiles not? Not a tear!

Luxander. Listen: the white hair of the ageless sea
Lashes the shore; yet the foam-maidens sing
And cast the yellow foam-flowers to the winds.

The Mother. Oh, this is madness! Speak to him! Luxander,
If ever thou didst hold me in thy heart,
Hear me now!

Father Lamion. If ever thou didst hold me wise and strong
In truth (and often you would say my words
Had azure wings bespangled with God's light),
Hear me now!

Luxander. Speak.

Father Lamion. Son, I too when yet a boy did sail
To many windy isles of dream and hope
To rear a column of the moonlight there
For future men to build on till it clove
The roof of night. But now that age is come,
And age's tragedy sits like an owl
Upon my shoulders, wisely sad, I see
No more the windy isles, nor moonlight columns,
Nor anything save night. You also age
Shall meet upon the highway, meet and grapple
And overcome. Ah, many like yourself
Have heard the distant voices of the sea,
The sighing of an overburdened world,
Command of duty, or the carolling
Of hope. Yet go not, hark not; never doubt
But they who follow siren tones return

No more .

Luxander. All things save only the broad sea
I doubt.

Father Lamion. O never let the lean hag doubt
Stir with her crooked fingers your hot thoughts,
And cast her reptile spawn into your mind.
You doubt yourself and therefore doubt all else;
Because God does not lead the halcyon days
Before you like white horses bearing gifts
Of precious raiment, linen, cloth of gold,
And satins spun with silver, for your shoulders,
You doubt the dear felicity of life
And cast your longings for the sea.

Luxander. O Father,
Your words beat on immaleable bronze.
Give o'er. I have a spirit in me stronger
Than words.

The Mother. By the dear name of motherhood,
And by the life which I have given, hear,
Oh hear our prayer!

Father Lamion. By the dear name of Christ,
And by the love which he hath given, hear,
Oh hear our prayer!

Nyassa. Luxander!

The Mother. Hear our prayer,

Father Lamion. Oh hear!

Luxander. I have a spirit in me stronger
Than life, or Christ, or love!

(He runs to the door and, with no apparent effort, throws it open. The darkness flows into the church like a river into a gulf.

Luxander. Who follows me?

Father Lamion. Let them who pass that door forever be
Accursed of God.
Nyassa. Luxander, lead the way.
(Nyassa *goes to* Luxander, *and he taking her by the hand, leads her into the darkness. The door slowly closes: a thud, and then silence.*
The Father. Methought I heard the plangent sea.

Act III

Scene:—*A small island covered with faded beach grass. Around it, as far as the eye can reach, stretch the marshes, green and black—the green of things that grow far down in the sea, the black of rotted earth.*

On a mound of earth lies Nyassa, *a child asleep in her arms. She is changed: the strange faint flower has attained its season of most exquisite pallor when the grace of its youth and the white bloom of its noonday are sinking into the fall.*

Nyassa. I wonder what he will bring back with him.
Hunger runs yelping at my heels, and you,
Poor child, must suck with tender baby lips
At breasts grown dry and hard. O God of Light,
But I grow weary of the darkness here!
(*She goes a little way looking for* Luxander)
Sometimes I think it were a better thing
And nobler to have done, to fall, and sink
Into the cool wet swamp. I shall grow numb
If he return not soon. My thoughts are huddled
Like sheep in winter when the cormorant wind
Swoops shrieking over the sad plains and valleys.
I think my heart will break, want gnaws the strings
With such tenacious teeth and shrewd. O Christ,
Why ever did I leave where I might gaze
Upon thy placid brows to seek the wild
Blear haggard eyes of night!

(*Enter* Luxander. *He too is changed: the pale face is thinner, the wan cheeks are sunken and*

touched with hectic red, and the wild look of the haunted is in the fearful brilliance of his eyes. He goes with shambling steps to the mound, and sinks down).

Nyassa. What have you brought?

Luxander. There was a frost this morning, and the roots
Are frozen. I am tired. Let me rest.

Nyassa. Luxander, we are starving and the winter—

Luxander. We must move onward, we approach the sea.
To-day I found entangled in the weeds
A lone halgerda with a broken wing;
And when I set it free—

Nyassa. You set it free
Though I lack sustenance, your baby starves?

Luxander. It had the sea-smell in its wings, it had
The sea-light in its eyes. They fly not far
Landward. We are now near the shore.

Nyassa. Luxander,
We must find food or starve.

Luxander. I will go seek
Again when I have rested me a little.

Nyassa. What month is it?

Luxander. I know not; in the air
I sniff the winter storms.

Nyassa. We have no shelter.
The clouds are massing eastward. They are heavy
And dark.

Luxander. Methought I saw a light peep through
The clouded windows in the East.

Nyassa. You dream.

Luxander. Nay, but there was a light! Far out upon
The level acres of the sea, the dawn,
I know, is treading with her silver feet.
Nyassa. O dreamer ever youthful, dream of light!
Though death, who skulks in these waste marshes, found you
And wrapped about your brows his mist-cold hair,
You would believe it was an aureole.
Luxander. Ay, ever youthful, for when death shall come
And fasten his webbed fingers on my wrist,
Staying my hand, I shall be standing high
And casting from the tower of my youth
My lances at the sun.
Nyassa. Hark, what was that?
Luxander. The booming of the sea.
Nyassa. The storm it was,
The storm! We have scant raiment and a storm
Impends; we have no food, we have no shelter,
And aged winter for his bloodless veins
Sucks out the juices of the grass. O God,
Faint am I and pale-withered as the grass,
Arid and bloodless as the winter winds!
Luxander, rouse thee ere it be too late.
Luxander. Too late it is when winter drives his storms
To harrow the unready world.
Nyassa. O brave!
Lie there. Grow old like wrinkled ocean gazing
Upon the steadfast sky (O valorous!)
And let my woman's hands and stumbling feet
Find food and shelter for thy child and thee.

(Nyassa *starts to rush into the surrounding darkness when* Luxander *seizes her wrist*).

Luxander. Nay stay, Nyassa, stay a moment. Hear
Me speak.

Nyassa. What have you in your soul for me
Or for my child that I should stay to hear?
What words, what thoughts, what solace for a
mother?
I have sat through my night of love, and looked
Into the widening gulch, and seen the flames
Splashing the high heavens. Now behold the dawn
Stark on the ashes!

Luxander. Hear me speak.

Nyassa. My child
Is starving.

Luxander. Hear my love.

Nyassa. O would you lure
My ear with legends of a golden past?
Speak now of love, and love is as a summer's
Story, told over on the winter eve.
I go.

Luxander. O whither, whither?
(Nyassa *rushes out*)
Gone.
(*He takes up the sleeping child*).
O son,
Where shall thy ocean be and where thy marsh?
Thou also shalt beneath a rainbow arch
Pass onward to the wide domains, and hear
The clarion voices, and behold the hopes
And aspirations of the world swim up
From regions laminarian to breathe

The fresh winds from thy lips. Thou too shalt hearken
And behold and—O child, my child, would God
That I could make thine own my sea,
And straining darkling through the leachy marsh
Place thee upon thy shore!
(*He lays the child down, and himself sits*).
And if there be
No ocean and no dawn? O Life and Death,
That from your adamantine breasts I could
Tear out the mysteries! O twins of evil,
Hell-nurtured pair that mock us with the vast
Cathedral of the world! O Life and Death!
O chorister, blind chorister that sings
The fruitless litanies of fruitless struggle!
O monk that chants the requiem of all things!
(*A long pause. Then suddenly* Luxander *leaps to his feet*).
No, no! I'll not, I'll not believe 't! Still down
The slant winds stream the jewels of the dawn,
And wrathful ocean gathers up his might,
And with his loosened armies cannonades
The barriers of the unprogressive world.
On! On!
(*As he starts to rush out, he meets* Nyassa)

Nyassa. Luxander.

Luxander. Onward!

Nyassa. O Luxander,
There is no onward. All around us lie
The quicksands, the green scurf, and coiling slime.
Further than this no islands are, no place
Of rest.

Luxander. You falter?
Nyassa. Come with me, O come
Thou back! Nay, look upon thy child and hear.
Luxander, think of all I gave to thee
And grant this little boon.
Luxander. O tell me not
Of what you gave: our separate souls roamed o'er
The tropic forest, eager lips apart,
And thin hands waving through the crimson night
Until they met and interlocked forever.
Go from me now. Take what thou wilt away.
Thou canst not, nay, not God himself could smooth
The pressure of thy fingers from my soul,
Nor tear the arms that twined, liana-like,
About the straight stem of my youth.
Nyassa. O love,
I have no strength to plead with thee. Yet hear
Me, for I drown in loving and the corpse
Of girlhood floats upon the surface.
Luxander. Come
And sit by me, Nyassa.
Nyassa. Chill your voice is
And fearful to mine ears. Alas, your heart,
Enamelled in the furnace of your hope,
Gleams bright for you, but oh! for me how cold
It shines! how glistening cold and hard.
Luxander. Nay, come
And sit my me, and let the last sad hour
Lay for all time upon our brows the touch

Of peace.

Nyassa. We have scant time for speech. Already
The lightning in a white intensity
Splits the thick night; a-far the thunders roll
And detonnate upon the distant hills.

Luxander. Stay but a minute, for if we must part,
If different voices call to you, 't were well
If you could leave me taking no ill thought
Away. For you must know, when first you came,
A tiny maiden, knocked upon the gates
And said you would behold the castle's lord,
My father laughing left his learned tomes
To greet you, and you spoke: *Great lord, let me*
Be tender of your flocks and roam with them
The flowered hills. And father answered: *Child,*
So fair thou art I would not turn thee hence,
So frail my sheep would take thee for a flower
And nibble thy sweet face. Meanwhile myself
Was leaning from the Eastern tower, pensive
With boyish sorrow, when I saw a ray
Of moonlight slanting to the courtyard where
It haloed round thy head. Then I arose
And scampered down the stairs, for sure, me-thought,
It was God's finger pointing to thee there.
Father, I cried, *the Lord God sends a playmate,*
For I am lonely. And my father smiled,
And took your hand and mine, and joined, and made
His answer: *God is good.*

Nyassa. And after, after?

Luxander. You made a lullaby of life and sang

My boyhood into youth.

Nyassa. And then?

Luxander. Ah, then,
Flushed with the wonder of ourselves we drew
Apart, and stood upon the threshold weeping,
Bewildered till one night you came to me
And breathed upon mine eyelids where I slept.

Nyassa. And in your sleep you cried aloud: *Not God*
Hath power to devise a fuller joy
Than this. And then the white clouds blew away
And dawn shone from your eyes. O my Luxander,
There was our soul's inheritance of life.

Luxander. So thought I as I stood immailed in love;
But soon there came a time of fear and trembling
As I felt pierce my hauberk the keen shafts
Of thought; for then I knew: a little while
Alas! white foam-flecks on the flying sea,
Storm-tossed we drift and struggle till a wind
Shakes off the foam-fleck to the shore
Where it goes out in vapor. *O to be*
A wave, I cried, *and churn one pebble smoother!*
To leave some mark how slight so'er it were!
To carve the indentation of my soul
On something though it be the barren hard
Estranging rock! And lo! upon mine ears
The creaking of the frozen sea when winds
Of spring shake from their azure wings the warmth
Of other lands, and lo! before mine eyes
The cloudy house of dawn, the golden aisles,
The towers brave with light.

Nyassa. And there beside
The frozen sea love's painted house fell down.
Luxander. O never say I do not love thee, sweet!
Indeed, indeed, I love! If you could know
How with soft blandishments I have caressed
The large-veined brows of destiny and kissed
His hard shut lips and fondled his clenched hands
That he might take the voices from my mind,
The vision from my haunted eyes, and let
My lips forever be instarred upon
The marble heaven of thy brow.
Nyassa. You love!
Luxander. Ay, still I love thee though the harnessed hours
Now whirl my car unguided to my doom.
Farewell.
Nyassa. Farewell, Luxander.
Luxander. O, my child,
My child! Nyassa, when his baby lips
First learn to lisp in speech, teach him the name
Of *Father*. Go. Farewell.

(Nyassa *rushes to him, presses again his breast, kisses his lips again and again with the wild lingering of passionate love, and then suddenly freeing herself, takes up the child and goes out.*

Luxander *whirls round to meet the first terrible onslaught of the storm.*

Luxander. Lead on, O storm,
Lead on! O sea, I come, I come, I come!

(*The darkness of the storm covers him. The winds shriek the high torn notes of agony, the thunders cannonade and rend the clouds, the lightnings now shoot like balls of fire at electric speed, now*

cover the sky with sheets of white flame, now pierce the darkness with fantastic patterns.

Almost as quickly as it burst, the storm dies: the lightnings are fitful flames, the thunders roll in the distance, the winds wail and moan.

Slowly the darkness bends back before a stark light which reveals in the distance a broad expanse of sea, a sandy shore, and nearer, on the edge of a black swamp, a figure: the hands clutch the tufts of grass, the body and legs are sunk in the ooze of the marsh, the head has fallen forward.